

WHIPPOORWILL
PILOT

Written by

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FADE IN:

INT. PENTHOUSE SUITE - SHANGHAI - NIGHT

SUPER: "SHANGHAI"

A Shanghai high-rise bathed in neon. Electric blues and pinks bleed through a floor-to-ceiling window, staining everything with synthetic glow.

TIGHT ON: a figure, dressed entirely in black, deep in shadow. A silhouette without age or readable shape.

Only two eyes. Cold. Flat. Empty.

This is SHADOW.

CLOSE ON: Shadow steadies a blade. A jade-inlaid silver ring on the left middle finger catches the light. On the back of the hand: a scar, pale and old, running from wrist toward knuckles.

ACROSS THE SUITE:

ZHAO LONG (60s) sits before the window, backlit by Shanghai's neon sprawl and the looming Tower. His expensive suit whispers money; the dragon tattoo on his neck screams Triad.

Silence.

A KNOCK.

ZHAO LONG
(in Mandarin)
Jìnrù.
(Enter)

A hulking BODYGUARD enters, leaning in close to whisper.

BODYGUARD
(in Mandarin)
Yíqiè dōuhěn ānquán, xiānshēng.
(Everything is secure, sir.)

Zhao Long dismisses him with barely a gesture. The Bodyguard nods, exits. The door CLICKS shut.

CLOSE ON: Shadow's eyes. Behind the cold stare, something flickers. A ghost of fire. Then it's gone.

A FEMALE VOICE-low, muffled, impossible to place-whispers through the silence.

SHADOW
You can never escape what you truly
are.

A tilt of the head and Shadow melts back into darkness.

CLOSE ON: Zhao Long's neck, dragon tattoo prominent. Shadow's knife kisses his throat. Zhao Long freezes, eyes wide, fixed on the Shanghai Tower before him.

SOUND: Two heartbeats merge into one accelerating rhythm.

SHADOW (CONT'D)
(soft, muffled)
This was your choice.

The blade presses. His breath hitches. The tower's bright lights reflect, then suddenly shatter in his eyes. A final choked GASP.

CUT TO BLACK.

One heartbeat drops out. The other slows. A single exhale. Silence.

FADE IN

Zhao Long's body is slumped forward against the window. His life is gone.

Shadow steps back, utterly calm.

A final, quick check of the room. No blood spatter. No trace.

Shadow moves to the door, opens it, and hits a switch by the frame.

A metal shutter slides down over the window, severing the neon skyline, drowning the suite and Zhao Long in absolute darkness.

Shadow slips out. The door CLICKS shut.

FADE TO BLACK

SUPER: "ONE YEAR EARLIER"

EXT. BLACK ROCK DRY LAKE, NEVADA - ONE YEAR EARLIER - NIGHT

SUPER: "Burning Man"

The Man COLLAPSES in a death-groan. Embers blast skyward. The desert roars with applause.

Fire dancers whirl in a cyclone of flame and sweat.

CLOSE ON: ASHLEY (23), dancing, drenched in sweat and firelight, her FIRE STAFF cutting through the air.

The flames illuminate a small tattoo on her inner wrist: a whippoorwill in flight.

She stops, closes her eyes, takes a deep breath.

ASHLEY
Don't fear it.

Her eyes snap open, she brings her Fire Staff close to her mouth, exhaling a burst of flame that spirals into the air. The crowd answers with a roar.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
FEEL IT!

She spins and leaps, vibrant against the backdrop of the roaring flames.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Let it go.

She kneels, gingerly scoops glowing embers. They sizzle against her skin.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
What fire takes...

She blows them away. Her eyes meet JASMINE (35), Australian, tribal attire, snake tattoo coiling her neck. A tense, seductive smile passes between them.

Ashley steps closer, a playful glint in her eyes.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Flames scare you?

JASMINE
I am the bloody fire, love.

Ashley circles her, fire staff loose in her grip. A subtle threat.

ASHLEY
Prove it.

They inch closer, tension crackling between them.

JASMINE
Show me you're worth my time, yeah?

Their heated challenge turns into a fast, erotic dance amid the fading flames. The staff whips through the air in sync with the pulsing rhythm.

PAN UP: to embers flowing against the stars. Drums gradually fade.

EXT. BLACK ROCK DRY LAKE BED - DAY

The scorching morning sun beats down as Ashley loads her vintage Technicolor VW microbus.

She pauses, watching the festival die around her - joyful strangers drifting past.

Jasmine strolls up.

JASMINE
Couldn't let ya vanish into the dust.

ASHLEY
Still here, melting into the landscape.

Jasmine brushes a stray hair from Ashley's face.

JASMINE
Last night... you set the sky on fire!

ASHLEY
The sky did that on its own.

Ashley turns back to her bus, still loading.

Jasmine leans in, picking up a well-worn copy of "Alice in Wonderland" tucked among the clutter. The cover is taped together, pages dog-eared.

JASMINE
Top stuff! Every wanderer needs a guide, eh?

ASHLEY
My favorite escape as a kid.
(beat)
Still is, sometimes.

JASMINE
This whole week... pure magic.

Ashley watches the festival fade. Longing, then a grin.

ASHLEY
Epic. Mind-fuckin-blowngely epic!
Next year?

Jasmine's smile curls, predatory and amused.

JASMINE
Oh, it'll find us. It always does.

Ashley pulls out her iPhone.

ASHLEY
Before all of this slips into dust.

They lean in for a photo. Jasmine winces when Ashley puts her arm around her.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Yikes. That burn's got teeth.

The picture snaps.

Ashley rummages through her bus, pulling out a bottle of aloe. She pours it into her palms.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Let me work some magic with this.

Ashley's hands TREMBLE VISIBLY, hesitating above Jasmine's sun-scorched skin. Aloe drips between her fingers.

JASMINE
You scared?

Ashley holds her stare.

ASHLEY
Not of the burn.

Ashley rests her fingers on Jasmine's skin. Both women inhale sharply.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Relax, just feel it.

Ashley's fingers glide over Jasmine's skin, her breath paralyzed for a moment, holding between desire and dread.

Jasmine's eyes flutter shut, savoring the moment.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Breathe.

The lotion glistens. Ashley's fingers brush along Jasmine's neck, following the edge of a tattoo - a snake coiled around her throat.

Ashley's fingers trace beneath the ink. She feels it - a thin, raised scar hidden under the design. Deliberate. Old.

Ashley's fingers pause. Jasmine's entire body goes rigid. Her eyes snap open - not pleasure, but something darker. Colder.

JASMINE
Don't!

Ashley pulls her hand back.

JASMINE (CONT'D)
It's okay. Old memory.

ASHLEY
What happened?

JASMINE
I cared about someone.

Lotion treatment ends. Jasmine notices the Whippoorwill tattoo.

JASMINE (CONT'D)
Birds that hunt at night... there's something pure about them.

Ashley glances at her - a moment of surprise, maybe recognition - then it passes.

ASHLEY
You don't hear them out here.

Jasmine tenderly caresses Ashley, her fingers tracing the tattoo.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Feel better now?

Jasmine grins, pecking Ashley on her cheek.

JASMINE
This desert burns away the surface... and what it reveals can be truly magnificent.

Ashley's smile tightens. She avoids eye contact, stowing the lotion with trembling hands.

Jasmine leans against the door, her gaze piercing yet inviting.

JASMINE
Next year, yeah? You reckon?

ASHLEY
Count on it.

JASMINE
When the flames circle 'round
again.

Jasmine strolls away. Ashley's longing gaze lingers, a single tear tracing down her dusty cheek.

Jasmine looks back, her expression revealing a predatory gleam in her eye. She turns away.

Ashley slides into the driver's seat, gazing at the dissipating utopia before starting the engine.

INT. ASHLEY'S BUS - CONTINUOUS

Bright beads dangle from the rearview mirror. On the dashboard sits a SNOW GLOBE, CRACKED, a yellow bird caught mid-flight inside.

Ashley's gaze lingers on a small, faded photo of her FATHER (25) in army fatigues, holding a laughing young girl. She gently presses her fingers to the image.

SOUND: A faint echo of CHILDHOOD LAUGHTER drifts through the air.

She picks up the snow globe and gently shakes it. As the tiny flakes swirl, the laughter distorts.

FLASHBACK: INT. DARK ROOM - DAY

A YOUNG ASHLEY (8), holding the intact snow globe, cowers, a SHADOWY FIGURE looming over her.

A FEMALE VOICE, sharp and venomous, crackles.

STEPSMOTHER (V.O.)
You think you're special? You're
nothing!

Ashley flinches, the snow globe slips from her hands, CRACKING on the floor.

STEPSMOTHER (V.O.)
A disappointment. Just like your father.

Ashley's fingers curl into a fist – a spark of fury swallowed fast.

BACK TO PRESENT

Ashley's breath catches, Her fingers tighten around the cracked globe.

She nearly hurls it, then stops. She exhales, jaw clenched, grounding herself and sets it back.

She turns the ignition key. The engine rumbles to life.

She flips on the vintage radio. Psychedelic 60s rock fills the bus—dreamy, slightly haunting.

Ashley taps the steering wheel to the beat, rhythm slightly forced.

EXT. BLACK ROCK DESERT – DAY

Ashley's colorful bus cuts across the vast beige desert, trailing dust.

INT. ASHLEY'S BUS – DAY

Ashley peers ahead at an endless backed-up line of campers, trailers, and cars, all baking in the relentless heat, waiting to crawl out of the desert.

She stops and slumps in her seat, staring out the windshield. The faint sound of nostalgic radio music plays.

ASHLEY
Give me a break!

In the distance, something catches her eye. A light SHIMMERING AND PULSING like a signal mirror.

Ashley drums her fingers, her gaze shifting between the shimmering light and the stagnant line of cars.

She turns the wheel, steering away from the traffic line and toward the inviting shimmer.

REARVIEW MIRROR - HER POV

The traffic line dissolves into the rising cloud of dust.

EXT. EDGE OF BLACK ROCK DRY LAKE BED - DAY

Ashley's bus rolls to a stop. A rusted, bullet-ridden Mercedes-Benz rests beside a skeletal doorframe. Shattered bottles dangle on strings from a greasewood bush.

One UNBROKEN WHISKEY BOTTLE, sparkling and SHIMMERING in the sunlight.

EXT. DESERT - CONTINUOUS

Ashley steps out, drawn to it.

She reaches for the bottle, hesitates. The breeze dies and silence envelops her, amplifying the glint of broken glass below.

ASHLEY

Amazing how beauty hides in such
wreckage...

A TRAIN WHISTLE slices through the stillness, its HEADLAMP cutting through the heat waves. She waves.

The ENGINEER leans out. She bites her lip. He looks like her father. Same jawline, same eyes. He waves back, SOUNDS the horn in recognition, then looks ahead, vanishing into the heat waves.

She steps back, shaking her head, overwhelmed. A tear rolls down her cheek. She fights to regain composure.

The breeze returns. The whiskey bottle's glass reflects the fading train.

Her gaze shifts to the rusted car. Her fingers trace a long, thin streak of blood-red rust. She turns back to her bus and swings open the driver's door.

EXT. DESERT DIRT ROAD - DAY

OVERHEAD SHOT: The bus pulls up to a dusty dirt road and comes to a stop.

INT. BUS - CONTINUOUS

Ashley's gaze darts left, spotting distant buildings. To the right, the vast, barren desert. She pauses, her fingers drumming against the steering wheel.

A slight smile.

ASHLEY
Down the rabbit hole...

EXT. BUS - CONTINUOUS

OVERHEAD SHOT: The bus turns right, its bright colors contrasting against the desert beige.

INT. BUS - DAY

Ashley drives the dusty, bumpy road when suddenly a GRINDING NOISE erupts from the engine. She scans the dashboard, her expression tightening.

The grinding becomes a desperate SHRIEK. The engine SPUTTERS and BACKFIRES with a loud POP. The engine dies.

ASHLEY
Shit!

She swerves off the road, crashing through desert brush before lurching to a halt.

She turns the key, RRR... RRR... The engine sputters, coughs, and dies.

ASHLEY
No, no, no.

She exhales sharply and pounds her fists on the steering wheel.

She turns the key, the engine sputters and dies once more.

She thumps her head against the steering wheel, lets out a frustrated sigh, then pushes the door open.

EXT. DESERT - CONTINUOUS

Ashley hops out, scanning up and down the empty, desolate road. Sweat beads on her forehead.

ASHLEY
Well, fuck me blue.

She grabs a couple of tools and opens the engine compartment. Her hands moving with practiced familiarity.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Damn! Well, you break it, you fix it, right, Daddy?

She dives underneath, grimacing. A bolt resists, metal screeching in protest. A tool slips - WHACK - striking her forehead. Blood runs into her eye.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Fuck!

Blood and grease. The bolt won't budge. She SLAMS her fist-knuckles split on sharp metal.

A breath.

Repositions the wrench. Full weight. It moves. Triumph flickers through the pain.

ASHLEY
There we go.

She emerges from under the bus, wipes sweat from her brow with the back of her hand.

She examines her bloody, split knuckles. Brings them to her lips and slowly licks the blood clean, one finger at a time.

Not disgusted. Not even aware. Just... automatic.

A sudden CLUCK draws her attention. She turns her head to see a CHICKEN eyeing her curiously.

ASHLEY
What the...?

She picks up the chicken and scans the landscape, spying a COYOTE eyeing her.

ASHLEY
Ah! I wouldn't want to be someone's dinner either.

She opens the door and places the chicken on the seat.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Don't you dare shit on the furniture, ok?

A LOW GROWL. Ashley spins.

The coyote, 20 feet away. Drooling. Eyes fixed on the chicken.

Ashley hurls a rock—misses. The coyote advances.

She hurls another rock—THWACK—hits it squarely.

ASHLEY
YAHHH... BEAT IT!

The coyote snarls, still advancing. Ashley grabs a stick. She charges with sudden fury.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Bring it, muthafucker.

The coyote leaps. Ashley swings—WHACK! Both tumble to the ground, scramble up fast.

Ashley raises her stick, eyes cold and feral.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
YAHHH!

The coyote hesitates, then bolts away, tail between its legs. Ashley watches it disappear into the distance.

She flings the stick aside, breath ragged, fury still coursing through her.

Returning to her bus, she pours water over her head. The rage slowly drains away.

She looks at her bloody knuckles and licks the blood away, a satisfied smile on her face.

Her gaze settles on the chicken, perched calmly on the seat, absurd and serene. Her mask of humanity returns.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
You're not scared of me at all, are you?

She pours water into a cup for the bird, a broad smile breaking across her face.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
I saved your feathered ass. We're partners now.

INT. ASHLEY'S BUS - DAY

Ashley slides into the driver's seat, looks at her knuckles, flexes her fingers, winces. She glances at the chicken.

ASHLEY
Let's see if we fixed everything.

She turns the ignition key. VROOOM! The engine springs to life.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Ha! Damn right!

She shifts into gear and rolls forward.

EXT. ASHLEY'S BUS - OVERHEAD - CONTINUOUS

The bus turns onto and rolls down a paved highway, picking up speed, growing smaller as it pushes forward into the sprawling desert.

INT. ASHLEY'S BUS - DAY

Ashley reaches over and tenderly pets the chicken.

ASHLEY
Second chances... daddy would've loved this.

The bird tilts its head - curious.

Ashley smiles softly.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Yeah. Me too.

INT. ASHLEY'S BUS - LATER

A sign flash's by: "Nevada Highway 50. The Loneliest Road in America." Her smile wavers.

She rummages beneath the dashboard, pulls out a colorful pot pipe. Lights up, inhales deeply, and releases a swirling cloud of smoke, turning her playful gaze to the chicken.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Want a hit?

She chuckles at her own joke, then takes another pull.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Come on, it'll make you smarter.

Her grin fades as she stares out at the endless road ahead.

Up ahead: a speck on the road, the speck grows legs, then an arm. A lone hitchhiker - CODY, late 20's, sunburnt, rugged in Levi's and a trucker's cap. Coat and a weathered backpack beside him.

Ashley perks up. A slow smile forms.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Perfect!

Cody waves.

She stashes the pipe and pulls over and rolls down a window.

ASHLEY
Where ya headed?

CODY
Just past Eureka. But in a pinch,
I'll take anywhere with shade and
water.

Ashley motions for him to get in as the radio background music changes to "CHINA GROVE" by THE DOOBIE BROTHERS.

ASHLEY
Hop in.

Cody opens the door, freezes when he sees the chicken.

ASHLEY
She adopted me. Just don't piss her off.

Cody grins, tosses his pack into the back - it lands with a heavy THUD - gently lifts the chicken onto his lap, and closes the door.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Not much out there just past
Eureka.

CODY
No ma'am, there ain't. Scrawny cattle's about it. Not exactly the stuff of legends.

Ashley grinds a few gears, and off they go. A momentary silence as they drive. Cody nods at the chicken.

CODY
She got a name?

ASHLEY
Myrtle.

CODY
Odd name for a chicken.

ASHLEY
Ever read Gatsby?

Cody blinks, utterly baffled.

CODY
Who?

Ashley smiles, then returns her attention to the road.

CODY
Didn't catch your name.

ASHLEY
Didn't give it.

Cody grins. Touché.

CODY
Fair enough, Cody. Professional
wanderer and part-time cowboy.

Ashley glances over, sizing him up, then back to the road ahead.

ASHLEY
Cody huh? Ashley, call me Ash.

Cody grins, charming.

CODY
Howdy, Ash. So where y'all headed
anyway?

ASHLEY
East for now. One direction's as
good as another.

CODY
Bit of a free spirit, huh?

ASHLEY

Like to think so. Just me, this old bus...

She nods towards Myrtle.

ASHLEY

...her, and whatever's up ahead.

CODY

Guess you ain't from around these parts, are ya?

Ashley sweeps her hand across the barren landscape.

ASHLEY

I don't see much around here to be from.

Both chuckle, a lighthearted connection building.

Cody surveys the colorful chaos within the bus.

CODY

Burner?

Ashley nods, her expression a blend of nostalgia and longing.

CODY

How long you been doin' that?

ASHLEY

Five years now. Dropped out of school, wandered a bit, woke up one morning naked on a dry lake.

She catches Cody's gaze.

ASHLEY

Been going back ever since. You?

Cody shakes his head.

CODY

Nah, not my thing. See a lot of folks like you out on the road around this time each year.

Cody's eyes drift to the snow globe on the dashboard, curiosity piqued. He reaches for it.

Ashley's hand shoots out, stopping him.

ASHLEY

Don't.

Cody pauses. Reads her face as her smile falters. He withdraws his hand slowly.

CODY

Wasn't gonna break it.

He glances at the globe, then at the sun blazing through the windshield. He removes his cap and uses it to shade the globe.

Ashley's eyes flicker to the cap, then to him. Her grip on the wheel softens.

Over the radio.

RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

...Sarah Corvino, missing over a week after hitchhiking from Vegas to Burning Man. Her uncle, reputed mob boss Alex Corvino, is offering a half-million dollar reward...

Cody goes very still. His jaw tightens.

Ashley glances at him, curious.

ASHLEY

Probably just shacked up somewhere.

CODY

Hitchhiking from Vegas. Alone. This time of year. She ain't shacked up.

Ashley catches the edge in his voice.

CODY (CONT'D)

Trouble finds you out here.

He stares out at the desert.

ASHLEY

Makes you wonder what she found.

Her own reflection stares back from the mirror. Unreadable.

INT. ASHLEY'S BUS - LATER

Through the windshield, Ashley sees a sign, "Middlegate Station. Cold Beer, Cocktails, Pool, Good Food. 1 Mile Ahead."

ASHLEY
I could really use a cold one.

CODY
On me. Least I can do.

ASHLEY
You drive a hard bargain. I'll take it!

The bus coasts as they approach Middlegate Station.

ASHLEY
Never stopped here before.

CODY
Sometimes a place just calls you.

Ashley nods.

EXT. MIDDLEGATE STATION - CONTINUOUS

The bus approaches a weathered sign:

MIDDLEGATE STATION - FOOD • GAS • BAR
Population: 9 (On Good Days)

Middlegate Station—weathered wood teetering on collapse. Battered cars and choppers parked alongside ghostly horse-drawn buggies.

Ashley's bus pulls into the dirt parking lot in a swirl of dust.

INT. MIDDLEGATE STATION - CONTINUOUS

The door CREAKS open. Ashley and Cody enter, Myrtle under Ashley's arm. Dollar bills plaster the ceiling. A mounted elk head oversees grizzled bikers and locals.

At the bar, Cody pushes aside a clipboard. The bartender, RICK (50), with tattooed arms like logs and a vintage cowboy hat, walks up.

RICK
Howdy folks. What can I fix y'all up with?

Leaning toward Myrtle, he breaks into a wide grin.

RICK
And who's this little darlin'?

Ashley grins, ruffling Myrtle's feathers affectionately.

ASHLEY
She's civilized. Mostly.

Rick's gaze shifts to Ashley and Cody, mischief twinkling in his eyes.

RICK
Hope she ain't orderin' the daily special, chicken strips.

Ashley snorts, Cody chuckles.

RICK (CONT'D)
So, what'll it be?

CODY
Two Buds.

ASHLEY
Coldest you got. I'm melting.

Rick nods, retrieves two frosty Buds and a small cup of water for Myrtle, and sets them down with a satisfied THUD.

Cody hands Rick a twenty, waving the change.

They chug their beers. Cody signals for another round and points to a Slim Jim container behind the bar.

CODY
And a stick.

Rick brings two more Buds and the container. Cody pulls out a Slim Jim. Ashley scowls.

ASHLEY
That shit'll kill you.

Cody pops it in his mouth, grins.

CODY
Not today it won't.

He offers her the container, she shakes her head.

ASHLEY
I don't eat animals.

CODY
Suit yourself.

Ashley sets Myrtle on a stool, grabs her beer, and wanders to a colorful vintage jukebox. She digs into her pocket and pulls out only lint.

ASHLEY

Damn...

Dropping to her knees, she sweeps underneath, still short.

She spots a donation jar on the bar. With Rick's back turned, she shoots a mischievous glance at Cody and swiftly grabs some coins, winking at him.

CODY

You're full of surprises, ain't ya.

Ashley feeds the jukebox and makes a selection.

Disco beats pulse through the air—unexpected, infectious. Ashley starts to dance, her movements fluid, seductive, and untamed. Drawing everyone's attention.

Cody watches. Not moving. Not smiling. His eyes track her like he's memorizing something.

A drunken SCRUFFY LOCAL eyes her with a predatory gaze.

Scruffy lurches toward her, drink in hand, his swagger underscored by a stony glare. Locals take notice, glancing between Scruffy and Cody.

He tries to drape his arm around Ashley.

SCRUFFY LOCAL

Hey there, firecracker. Wanna go have some fun?

Ashley jerks away, her playful demeanor hardening into steel.

ASHLEY

Not on the menu, Sparky. Try the chicken strips!

Scruffy's eyes narrow as he draws closer, his presence imposing.

SCRUFFY LOCAL

Aw, c'mon. I asked nice.

She meets his gaze, her expression low and lethal.

ASHLEY

Touch me again and I'll break every
finger in your hand. One at a time.

SCRUFFY LOCAL

Bark don't scare me.

ASHLEY

Then you're dumber than you smell.

Cody rises from his barstool, gaze sharpening.

Rick leans in, his voice serious.

RICK

Watch yourself. That one's fresh
out of Ely and thinks he's tough.
He ain't.

Cody strides forward, jaw set and posture threatening.
Chatter in the room drops, all eyes on the impending
confrontation.

He grabs Scruffy's arm, their faces inches apart.

CODY

Find someone else to bother,
friend.

Scruffy snarls back defiantly.

SCRUFFY LOCAL

I ain't your fr-

Cody twists Scruffy's arm, SLAMMING him against the jukebox.
Scruffy winces, bravado crumbling.

CODY

No, I'm mighty damn sure you ain't.

Cody's hand stays on Scruffy's shoulder a beat too long,
thumb pressing into the soft tissue. Scruffy winces, tries to
push away.

CODY (CONT'D)

Pain teaches you real quick who's
in charge.

Scruffy deflates, a mixture of frustration and fear darkening
his features.

SCRUFFY LOCAL

Okay, okay. Just trying to be
friendly is all.

Cody dismisses him with a shove and a cold stare. Chuckles ripple through the room.

Cody and Ashley return to their seats. Ashley narrows her gaze at Cody.

ASHLEY
I had it handled.

CODY
Guys like that don't stop. Not without a reason.

An uneasy silence hangs in the air as Ashley holds his gaze. Just when it seems it might escalate a playful smirk cracks her facade.

ASHLEY
Expect me to thank you?

Cody shrugs.

CODY
You're welcome.

Ashley's eyes wander and spot a PURPLE HEART in a case behind the bar. Her eyes linger on it.

ASHLEY
My dad had one of those.

Without even following her gaze, Rick responds somberly.

RICK
Iraq left me with that. And a pile of pills I don't take.

A reflective hush falls over them.

ASHLEY
He found his at the bottom of a whiskey bottle.

Her voice hardens.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
My stepmother made sure of that.
(beat) Buried him when I was fourteen.

Her voice is steady but her eyes glisten.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
He never said a word about what he
did over there. Not even when I
asked him.

A single tear breaks free, runs down her cheek.

RICK
War leaves scars, kid. The ones you
can't see are the ones that stick
you good.

He pauses, his expression darkening.

RICK (CONT'D)
Twists you 'til you don't recognize
the face in the mirror.

Ashley wipes the tear away and smiles at Rick. Small, genuine, grateful.

Her gaze drifts to the clipboard Cody pushed aside earlier. She reaches over, pulling it close.

At the top is a missing person notice from the Nevada Highway Patrol with a picture of Sarah Corvino, her silver necklace with the initials "SC" prominently displayed.

CLOSE ON: The flyer. Sarah's smile. The necklace. The pendant.

Ashley studies it carefully. Rick wipes the bar nearby.

RICK (CONT'D)
Highway Patrol dropped that off
about an hour ago. This one's got
juice - some mobsters kid.

Cody leans in, his expression darkening. He stares at the photo a beat too long.

CODY
Girls like that... they think
they're untouchable.

He stares at Sarah's photo, something dark crosses his face.

Ashley stares at him, something catches her attention. After a beat she continues sifting through the stack.

RICK
This place'll swallow folks up
whole.

(MORE)

RICK (CONT'D)
One minute you're standin' right
there, the next... poof, gone.

He points to a Grateful Dead keychain hanging from the elk's horns.

RICK
See that? Belonged to a guy who
said he'd be right back.

ASHLEY
When?

RICK
A year ago.

Beat.

RICK (CONT'D)
Car's still out back.

Ashley continues sifting through the stack, her curiosity piqued.

ASHLEY
This happen a lot?

RICK
Five years back, things changed.
Now? August, September...

He trails off, returns to wiping the bar.

ASHLEY
And?

RICK
Lots of open land and old holes.
Desert doesn't care either way.

Ashley lets out a soft, sad sigh.

ASHLEY
The world's a scary place.

Rick casts a pointed glance at Cody and then back at Ashley.

RICK
You be careful out there.

She winks at Rick, her attention drawn to a car speeding past on the highway. She watches it disappear into the distance.

CODY
Give me the back of a good horse,
any day.

ASHLEY
Says the guy with no hat, no spurs,
not even a swagger.

Ashley's smile sharpens, something unreadable in her eyes.

Cody holds her gaze, uncertain if that was flirtation.

She motions to Rick for another round.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Got this one.

INT. MIDDLEGATE STATION - LATER

Ashley and Cody gather their things. Ashley scoops up Myrtle, exchanges a nod with Rick.

As they pass Scruffy's table, she spots his CAR KEYS. He's slumped over, face-down next to his drink.

Ashley "accidentally" bumps the table. The drink spills. Scruffy jolts awake, lunging for it.

In that split second, Ashley pockets the keys.

SCRUFFY LOCAL
Hey! Watch it!

ASHLEY
Oops! Sorry.

She's already moving toward the door, all innocence.

EXT. MIDDLEGATE STATION - CONTINUOUS

Bright sunlight. Desert heat. Ashley shields her eyes. Cody seems unfazed.

INT. ASHLEY'S BUS - CONTINUOUS

Ashley sets Myrtle in the back and fires up the bus.

CODY
Hell of a pit stop.

Ashley snorts.

ASHLEY

Men like him only understand two
things: distance... and
consequences.

Cody studies her - curious, maybe impressed, maybe wary.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)

Hey, you like ghost towns?

CODY

Been to a few. Why?

Ashley grins, flicking on the radio. "RIDERS ON THE STORM" by The Doors crackles through the speakers.

ASHLEY

No pressing schedule, right?

Cody shakes his head. Ashley grins.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)

You're gonna love this.

CODY

Looks like I'm just along for the
ride, huh?

ASHLEY

"If you give this man a ride..."

She grinds gears and jolts forward, making a right turn onto Hwy 361, and accelerates. A road sign flashes by: "Gabbs 30".

CODY

Godforsaken lil' place.

ASHLEY

I'm sure it has its charms.

CODY

Let me know if you find one.

ASHLEY

Hey!

Cody's eyes dart to Ashley as she dangles Scruffy's keys in front of him.

ASHLEY

Told you I can look after myself.

She holds his gaze for a beat, then, with a dramatic flourish, flings the keys out the window.

Cody chuckles, shaking his head.

CODY
Damn, I'd hate to be that poor bastard.

Ashley's eyes flick to the rearview mirror. The road behind is empty except for one car, far back.

INT. ASHLEY'S BUS - LATER

Sunlight pours through dusty windows. The engine hums.

Cody watches Ashley drive.

CODY
You ever think about going back?
Finishing school?

ASHLEY
And studying what?

She glances at the snow globe on the dashboard.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
I wanted to be a lot of things
once.

A brief laugh that dies in her throat. Her eyes flick to the rearview mirror. One car, far back, keeping pace.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
What about you?

CODY
I had the opposite problem. Too
good at one thing.

He rubs his knee absently.

CODY (CONT'D)
Fullback. Kansas State. Full
scholarship. One play away from the
NFL.
(beat)
Blew my knee out. Scouts vanished.
So did I.

ASHLEY
That's why you're out here?

CODY
Out here nobody expects you to be
anything.

Ashley holds his gaze, then looks back to the road.

ASHLEY
Sometimes, disappearing sounds
like—

Suddenly, Ashley SLAMS on the brakes, catching Cody off-guard. Myrtle squawks.

CODY
Jesus Ash...

A sign comes into focus: "Berlin-Ichthyosaur State Park".
Ashley points to it.

ASHLEY
Ick-thee-o-sore. Prehistoric sea
monster.

CODY
Ichthyosaur. Greek for "fish
lizard". Reptile, not fish.

Ashley stares at him, surprised.

CODY (CONT'D)
Apex predator. Nothing hunted them.

ASHLEY
Didn't peg you as the science type.

CODY
Might've read a thing or two.
Scrawny cattle, remember? Lots of
time.

He looks out at the desert.

ASHLEY
Alright, Professor. Let's go see
your fish lizard.

The bus turns onto a dirt road.

Ashley's eyes flick to the rearview mirror once more. A car speeds by heading south down the highway.

She watches it disappear. Her grip on the wheel loosens slightly.

EXT. DIRT ROAD - LATER

The bus rumbles down the graded dirt road, a plume of dust rising in its wake.

AHEAD: A chain is slung between two posts, blocking the way. A sun-bleached, wooden sign hangs from it.

Painted letters cracked and peeling: "STATE PARK CLOSED FOR REPAIR." A single, rusted padlock holds the chain together.

INT. ASHLEY'S BUS - CONTINUOUS

Ashley doesn't slow down. Her eyes flick from the sign to the open desert beside the road.

The bus veers off without hesitation, tires crunching through brittle desert brush, kicking up dust. Myrtle squawks in protest.

Ashley grins and jostles the steering wheel through the rough terrain.

CODY
You do this often?

Ashley flashes him a quick, devil-may-care grin, her attention on the path she's carving through the wild.

ASHLEY
Only when there's a chain in my way.

EXT. DESERT - LATER

The bus bounces across the desert floor until it finds another dirt road.

CODY
You're insane!

Cody shakes his head, unable to suppress a smile. He checks the gas gauge, hovering barely above empty.

ASHLEY
Relax, there's a Rez and a couple of ranches ahead we can get some gas from if we need to.

CODY
And if they say no?

Ashley breaks into a mischievous grin.

ASHLEY
Who said anything about asking?

She shoots a quick glance at Cody. The bus barrels ahead.

EXT. DESERT FOOTHILLS - LATER

The bus winds through rolling hills dotted with scrub oak and piñon pine. The sun hangs lower, casting long shadows.

INT. ASHLEY'S BUS - CONTINUOUS

Ashley pulls over and shoots Cody a wink.

ASHLEY
Nature calls.

CODY
Don't take too long.

They lock eyes, a playful tension in the air.

ASHLEY
Send Myrtle if I'm not back.

Ashley laughs, turns the engine off, and hops out.

EXT. DESERT FOOTHILLS - CONTINUOUS

Ashley shivers and slips a coat on from behind her seat.

ASHLEY
Keep an eye on her.

She strides into the bushes.

Cody hops out, puts on his coat, grabs his pack, and withdraws a hefty KNIFE that he conceals.

From the bushes, Ashley's excited voice rings out.

ASHLEY (O.S.)
HEY! Get over here, Quick! Some big
critter has its eye on me. Hurry!

Cody's eyes widen. He trots in her direction, hand on his concealed knife.

He finds Ashley shivering, coat on, her pants gathered at her ankles. She turns her back to him.

He starts to draw his blade, his eyes fixed on Ashley's back. She points towards a clump of brush and piñon pine.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Over there! I heard it growl at me!

Heart racing, he tucks his knife back, concern crossing his face as he steps ahead.

CODY
Stay put!

Cody moves cautiously toward the bushes.

Suddenly, Ashley launches onto him from behind, a wicked grin flashing as she brandishes her own menacing blade.

Cody pivots sharply, sidestepping her thrust, her blade missing his throat by an inch.

CODY (CONT'D)
What the...?!

No answer. Ashley comes again—LOW SLASH—

He catches her wrist, twists. She drops, sweeps his legs out. He hits the dirt hard. They tumble, rolling in a frantic struggle, each grappling for control.

Blades flash and clash in a whirlwind of movement. Wild, fast, chaotic, and deathly exhilarating.

After a frantic beat, Cody has her pinned. His blade hovering close to her throat. Both panting hard.

CODY
What in the actual hell?

Ashley drives her knee into his groin HARD and, in an instant, is on top, her knife poised at his throat. A devious smile dances on her lips.

ASHLEY
Still think I can't look after
myself?

A charged silence hangs between them, broken only by their ragged, broken breaths. She plunges her knife into the dirt next to his throat, then grins, leans down, and kisses him fiercely. He kisses her back.

Both jump up, knives at the ready, circling each other, breathing hard.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
You... you were actually going to kill me.

CODY
You started it.

They stare at each other, a wild, mutual understanding dawning.

ASHLEY & CODY
What the fuck!

Knives hit the dirt. They crash into each other, pulling into a fierce embrace, lips meeting passionately as they claw at each other's clothing.

EXT. BUSHES - LATER

Both lay sprawled on the ground, bruised, battered, dirty, scratched up, and sweating like stuck pigs; utterly spent.

ASHLEY
Gawd, that was...

She trails off, shaking her head happily. Cody lets out a low whistle.

CODY
What are the odds?

ASHLEY
Slim to fuckin' none.

Cody pushes himself up on an elbow. He spots something in the dirt. A silver necklace with a pendant. Picks it up.

Ashley hand shoots out, quick.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
It's mine. Must have fallen out.

Cody drops it in her hand. She clinches it tight.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Thanks. It's sentimental.

She finds her shirt and tucks the necklace away.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
That bartender... when he said
people started disappearing five
years ago... thought you'd catch
that.

CODY
Guess I'm not the quickest study.

ASHLEY
You're about as sharp as a spoon!

Cody takes her hand, tracing the bird tattoo.

CODY
What's this?

CLOSE ON: the tattoo. Delicate and fragile looking.

ASHLEY
Whippoorwill.

CODY
Don't see many around these parts.

Ashley gazes away.

FLASHBACK:

EXT. ASHLEY'S CHILDHOOD BACKYARD - NIGHT

Young Ashley (12) sits outside, terrified. A fight between
her father and stepmother rages inside.

She rises and opens a doorway into the garage, flips on the
light.

INT. GARAGE - NIGHT

A small whippoorwill is trapped inside, frantically beating
against a window. Desperate to escape.

Ashley climbs a stepladder, reaches for it--

The bird panics. Flies headlong into the glass. Its neck
snaps.

Dead in its final struggle for freedom.

BACK TO PRESENT:

She takes a breath, grounding herself.

(CONT'D)
ASHLEY

I promised myself I would never
harm another animal, not even for
food.

Cody narrows his eyes, looking at their bloody knuckles and torn clothes.

CODY
Seems you draw the line in a
different place than most.

ASHLEY
It's not about the line. It's about
the animal.

CODY
The one you can't uncross.

A charged silence hangs between them. No longer two travelers, but now two predators recognizing the same scent.

CODY (CONT'D)
When my life went to hell I took
off hunting. Backcountry. Alone.
Weeks at a time. Cougar, bear,
anything that fights back.

ASHLEY
And did it?

CODY
Everything out here fights back.
With an animal, it's just biology.
Fear, fury, instinct. It's clean.

Cody's eyes darken. His breathing changes—deeper, slower.

CODY (CONT'D)
People... that's where you find the
music.

Ashley looks at her knife, testing its weight.

ASHLEY
My father used to say a cut always
tells you the truth.

CODY
What truth?

ASHLEY
That you're still alive. Still
something.

She sheathes the knife.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
When I was a kid, I was nothing.
Worthless. That's what my
stepmother told me every day.

Her jaw tightens.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
The first time I held a knife... I
wasn't worthless anymore.

CODY
You carved your own path.

ASHLEY
Literally.

A dark smile passes between them.

CODY
We're not poster children.

ASHLEY
Good. Posters are boring... so what
are the rules?

CODY
Don't get caught.

Ashley picks a strand of wild oat straw, tucking it between
her teeth.

ASHLEY
You claiming territorial rights?

Cody studies her, questioning.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
These parts seem to be your
territory, cowboy. I'm just a
tourist passing through.

CODY
Maybe I should.

ASHLEY
Wanna give me a permit? Like some
sort of seasonal hunting license?

CODY
I'm sure something can be arranged.
But first...

In a burst of laughter, they tumble together. Hands eagerly tearing at what little shreds of clothing remain.

Through the tangle of limbs and dust, her gaze drifts across the stark landscape. She freezes.

ASHLEY'S POV - There, on a distant ridgeline, flashes of light. They hold for a second, then vanish.

Her smile falters, her body going still for a heartbeat.

CODY (CONT'D)
What?

Ashley's eyes stay locked on the empty ridge as she pulls Cody back into the dust, her playfulness now a sharp, calculated mask.

ASHLEY
Nothing. A trick of the light.

Her eyes linger on the ridge a moment longer.

CODY
I know a small run-down ranch up in Montana for sale. Good fixer-upper.
Want to?

Ashley doesn't react.

CODY (CONT'D)
No neighbors for a mile. We can just watch the seasons run.

ASHLEY
Get a dog and complain about property taxes?

CODY
I'll build a fence.

ASHLEY
You really think we could do that?
Just... stop?

CODY
Why not?

A slow, wistful smile spreads across her face. She wants to believe it. Needs to believe it.

ASHLEY
What color's the barn?

INT. ASHLEY'S BUS - DUSK

Ashley drives. Headlights cut through the gathering dark.

Both look blissful, grinning like the cat that just ate the canary - two predators still circling, even in the afterglow.

ASHLEY
Let's chase the sunrise. Like
Burning Man without the dust
storms.

CODY
I'm in. Where we headed?

ASHLEY
Down the rabbit hole.
(beat)
Don't you have a job to get back
to?

CODY
Life dealt me a better hand.

He grins. Ashley blows him a playful kiss. Both glance in the back at Myrtle, peacefully asleep.

ASHLEY
Shhh... don't wake her. I wonder if
chickens dream about flying?

EXT. DESERT - NEXT MORNING - DAY

Morning sunlight streams through the bus windows. Desert silence.

Ashley wakes. Cody snores peacefully. She steps outside with Myrtle, surveying the vast emptiness. No buildings. No landmarks. Just desert.

She gazes back at Cody through the window. Studying him with an unreadable expression. Not quite affection. Not quite calculation. Something between.

She climbs back inside and shakes Cody.

ASHLEY
Up. Now. We need food.

He groggily rolls out of the blanket and slips his jeans on.

CODY
I'm starving. Where are we, anyway?

Ashley scans the horizon.

ASHLEY
Lost as hell.

CODY
That supposed to worry me?

ASHLEY
Not if you trust me.

A look between them, weighted, dangerous.

CODY
A map would help!

Ashley rummages through the clutter, pulls out a crumpled map.

ASHLEY
Found one!

She unfolds it. Frowns. It's of California.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Wrong state.

She crumbles it back up and tosses it away with a shrug.

CODY
Let's find something to eat before
we lose our minds out here.

ASHLEY
Too late for that.

Ashley walks to her door while petting Myrtle.

ASHLEY
Don't worry, I won't starve you.

Ashley sets Myrtle in the back, throws some clothes on, hops in, and starts the engine as Cody climbs in.

INT. BUS - DAY

The bus rumbles down the highway. Ashley drives, focused. Cody rests, feet on dashboard.

A grasshopper lands on the outside window. Cody's eyes lock onto it. The playful banter evaporates. In one fluid motion, he snatches it, holding it between thumb and forefinger. It kicks its powerful legs in a frantic struggle.

He pulls one of its legs off with a precise little twist. No smile. No malice. It's just... something to do.

CODY

You know what's beautiful? It
doesn't know it's already dead.
Still fighting. Still hoping.
People are like that.

He pulls the other leg off.

CLOSE ON: Ashley's face. Recognition and understanding. Then something shifts behind her eyes—disappointment, maybe disgust.

ASHLEY

Stop it!

Cody looks over, a playful innocence in his eyes.

CODY

Stop what?

ASHLEY

Torturing that poor thing.

Cody looks at the insect, then at Ashley, like he's trying to understand what the problem is.

CODY

Just a bug. It's going to die
anyway.

He stares at the insect's continued struggle with detached fascination.

CODY (CONT'D)

This way, it gets to feel something
first.

Ashley stares at him, recognizing his pleasure in pointless cruelty.

She grabs the grasshopper, stares at it for a moment.

ASHLEY
Just a bug.

Then gently places it in front of Myrtle, who snatches it up and swallows it whole.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Let nature take care of her own.

Ashley turns back to the road. Her jaw tightens slightly. The fantasy of Montana fades in her eyes.

EXT. PAVED ROAD - DAY

A weathered "Fields Station" sign flashes by, its faded paint a testament to the passing of many seasons.

The bus pulls into a dusty parking lot and coasts to a stop. Ashley and Cody take in the scene - a lone gas pump stands in front of a rustic, ramshackle store, surrounded by a few worn cabins and older houses.

Ashley turns to Cody, a playful smile on her lips.

ASHLEY
Looks like our kind of place, huh?

CODY
It beats being lost and hungry out in the middle of nowhere, that's for sure!

INT. FIELDS STATION STORE - DAY

The front door swings open with a jingle. The CASHIER looks up as Ashley and Cody walk in, Myrtle nestled under Ashley's arm.

CASHIER
Hey! No animals. Not chickens anyway.

ASHLEY
Emotional support. Want to see my doctor's note?

Cody smoothly slides a twenty across the counter.

The Cashier looks at the bill, hesitates, pockets the cash, nods.

CASHIER
Don't let her on the furniture.

They settle at the lunch counter. The COOK (40s) approaches, wiping his hands on a stained apron. He glances at Myrtle, then at the cashier, who shrugs.

COOK
What can I get ya?

CODY
Bacon and eggs. Over easy. Coffee.

The Cook nods, scribbles. Looks at Ashley.

ASHLEY
Just the eggs, scrambled.

Ashley points to Myrtle, nestled under her arm.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
And a slice of sourdough toast,
please.

COOK
Want butter on that?

ASHLEY
Maybe a little jelly on the side?

Cook shakes his head, bemused, and heads back to the grill.

A jingle fills the air as the door swings open again.

Slender, sun-tanned arms suddenly wrap around Ashley, squeezing her tightly.

JASMINE
G'day love.

Ashley turns around. Her mouth opens in surprise.

ASHLEY
Oh. My. God!

Ashley pulls her into a warm embrace.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Can't believe it's you!

An erotic smile crosses both their faces.

JASMINE
I was cruisin' by, saw your bus,
and thought I was dreamin'.

Ashley's disbelief quickly melts into excitement.

ASHLEY
What a wild twist of fate! Come on,
sit down. How's the sunburn?

Jasmine settles next to Ashley, eyes sweeping the room with controlled intensity.

JASMINE
Hardly a concern at all.

Cody coughs, a clear, forced sound.

ASHLEY
Oh right! This is Cody. And... you know, I never got your name?

A flicker of amusement crosses Jasmine's face.

JASMINE
Jasmine.

Cody tips his cap.

CODY
Howdy ma'am.

Ashley hugs his arm warmly.

ASHLEY
Cody here fancies himself a cowboy... or claims to be anyway.

JASMINE
That so? You certainly don't look like one.

Cody winks at Ashley.

CODY
Heard that a few times already.

Ashley playfully runs her hand through his hair, grinning ear to ear.

ASHLEY
He is cute though. Whatever he is.

The cook arrives, setting their food orders in front of them.

Ashley sets Myrtle on the floor next to her plate of toast and jelly.

COOK
Get you anything?

JASMINE
Cuppa, please.

COOK
Cuppa what?

JASMINE
Tea.

COOK
Coffee?

JASMINE
A cup of hot water'll do just fine.

The cook rolls his eyes and heads to the back. Jasmine leans toward Ashley.

JASMINE (CONT'D)
You should try one of their
milkshakes. Deadset brilliant. To
die for!

The cook returns with a cup of hot water. Jasmine pulls out a tea bag, sets it in the cup, and stirs while casting quick side-eyes at Ashley.

JASMINE (CONT'D)
There's a hot spring up the road a
few. Care to give it a go?

Ashley perks up.

ASHLEY
Love to!

Cody nods.

CODY
Sounds good.

Jasmine sips her tea, the steam curling around her face. Her smile growing wider, darker, and more mysterious.

EXT. ALVORD HOT SPRINGS - DAY

Ashley's bus and Jasmine's car pull into an empty dirt parking lot, desolate and eerily quiet.

INT. ASHLEY'S BUS - CONTINUOUS

Ashley turns off the ignition, the engine going silent as her gaze meets Cody's.

Cody scans the empty parking lot, determination etched on his face. He nods.

EXT. ALVORD HOT SPRINGS - CONTINUOUS

Ashley and Cody exit the bus and clasp hands. Their eyes fixed on Jasmine's sleek car, its vibrant sheen a stark contrast to the barren surroundings.

Jasmine steps out, a towel draped over her arm as if she were headed to the beach. Her gaze sharp and alert, quickly surveying the surroundings.

Through the window, Myrtle perches comfortably on Ashley's seat.

They stroll along a worn dirt path toward a small, wooden building. Steam rises from it.

INT. HOT SPRINGS SHED - DAY

Steam rises from hot pooling water inside, creating an ethereal mist. The only sound gentle bubbling.

Ashley and Cody sit at the edge of the springs, half-dressed.

ASHLEY
Feels like heaven.

CODY
You mean I feel like heaven.

Ashley flicks water at him. The sunlight DIMS. A METALLIC CLICK. Jasmine stands in the doorway, her head tilting for a moment, the way a predator studies a scent, as she trains a pistol on Ashley. They freeze.

JASMINE
I have a proposition for you.

Cody starts to rise. Jasmine steadies the pistol at his face.

JASMINE (CONT'D)
Sit. Now! Your life's not worth a
cracker to us. Test me and I'll
prove it.

Her attention shifts to Ashley.

JASMINE (CONT'D)
You thought the desert was big
enough to hide.

ASHLEY
I don't know what you mean.

JASMINE
From the one thing you can't
outrun.

ASHLEY
You weren't simply passing by, were
you?

JASMINE
Nah, darl. Not a chance. Learned to
track in the Outback.

ASHLEY
The tail?

Jasmine smiles.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
And the light on the ridge?

JASMINE
Very good. You looked right at me,
then pulled him back into the dirt.

Ashley's eyes widen as she pieces the puzzle together.

ASHLEY
The tattoo. You weren't hiding a
scar, you were showing me one.

Jasmine's smile sharpens.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Everything at Burning Man... you
were testing me. Every moment.

JASMINE
Stop denying what you are. You're
far more than you understand,
Ashley.

Ashley's eyes narrow.

ASHLEY
I never told you my name.

JASMINE
No, you never did, but we have a
knack for finding talent and
picking up the details.

Silence. Ashley processes this. The tail, the ridge, her name.

ASHLEY
What are you? CIA? MI6? Russian
Mafia?

Jasmine chuckles, the sound icy and dismissive.

JASMINE
Please, love, nothing so Drongo.

Jasmine's voice sharpens, contempt seeping in.

JASMINE (CONT'D)
Amateurs, the lot of 'em.

ASHLEY
Why me?

JASMINE
We see the fire in people. Most
burn out. You control it.

Cody shifts uneasily.

CODY
What do you want with her?

JASMINE
You do not get to ask questions.

Her eyes narrow, assessing Cody, cold, calm, and deadly.

JASMINE (CONT'D)
You're merely collateral, cowboy.

Ashley's eyes sharpen as she pieces together the puzzle.

JASMINE (CONT'D)
The playa burns away the mask,
yeah? Perfect spot to find raw,
unformed talent. Those already lost
and looking for a new type of fire.

CODY
Who's "we"?

JASMINE
Not for you to know. Her? Perhaps,
someday.

ASHLEY
Stop talking in circles. What
exactly do you do?

Jasmine's smile sharpens.

JASMINE
We retire problems. Monsters,
mostly.

ASHLEY
Who decides who the monsters are?

JASMINE
The monsters. By what they do.

ASHLEY
And after?

JASMINE
You disappear until the next one.
That's the life.

Ashley glances at Cody.

JASMINE (CONT'D)
Dead weight.

Cody rises, moving toward Ashley.

JASMINE (CONT'D)
You're already hunting, love. We
just direct you to the right prey.

Ashley's smile falters.

JASMINE (CONT'D)
This world will never forgive you
for what you've done. We will.

CODY
Ash, don't listen to this...

In a flash, Jasmine's pistol is at Cody's temple.

JASMINE

He sees a cage. I see a weapon who
just passed her first real test.

She tightens her grip on the pistol, her eyes locking onto
Cody's.

JASMINE (CONT'D)

Choose your next words with great
care.

Cody goes rigid, fear flashing in his eyes. Jasmine shifts
her focus to Ashley.

JASMINE (CONT'D)

We'd be bloody brilliant together.

Jasmine tosses the pistol to Ashley.

JASMINE (CONT'D)

You have a choice.

Cody freezes. Face pale. This isn't a cowboy anymore, but a
cornered animal.

CODY

We can just disappear. Like we
talked about. Montana? Just you and
me.

Ashley's fingers tighten on the grip. Steady. She aims it at
Cody, hesitating as his face drains of color. Ashley glances
at her Whippoorwill tattoo, then smiles at him. Cody starts
to smile back.

CODY (CONT'D)

Nobody will know what we are.

She shifts the pistol to Jasmine.

ASHLEY

I won't let you use him as
leverage.

Jasmine doesn't flinch. A flicker of a smile. Almost proud.

JASMINE

Oh, no, love. He's not leverage.

Silence. Ashley looks at Cody – really looks at him.

JASMINE (CONT'D)

Power chooses.

The gun shifts back to Cody.

ASHLEY
I know.

She steps closer, gun steady in one hand.

Ashley reaches out with her free hand and pulls him in close. Faces inches apart.

She kisses him. Deep. Passionate.

He kisses back. Confused. Hopeful. Terrified. Desperate. For a few seconds they're the lovers they could have been.

She breaks the kiss and locks eyes...

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
We don't build fences.

She whispers against his lips

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Just a bug.

CLOSE ON: Cody's eyes. Understanding floods in. Too late.

His mouth opens—

CUT TO BLACK:

The only sound—the BUBBLE of the springs. A sharp flash of light.

SOUND: A GUNSHOT.

Complete silence.

HOLD ON BLACK: for two beats. Ashley's ragged exhale.

The darkness lifts.

FADE IN: on Ashley's face. She wipes her lips. Her eyes flick to the water – a bloom of red spreading slowly.

CLOSE ON: The back of her left hand. Cuts, scrapes, dirt. But the skin from wrist to knuckles is unmarked. No scar.

She flexes her fingers. The gun feels wrong. Foreign.

Jasmine steps forward, eyes gleaming.

JASMINE
That was almost merciful. Almost.

ASHLEY
No. It wasn't.

A beat. Ashley stares at the pistol in her hand.

JASMINE
You prefer a blade, don't you?

Ashley's fingers tighten on the gun.

ASHLEY
Usually.

JASMINE
But not this time.

Ashley meets Jasmine's eyes. A slight smile.

ASHLEY
Not this time.

A tear rolls down Ashley's cheek. Jasmine catches it on her finger, shows it to Ashley, flicks it away.

JASMINE
You've become a weapon now, and
weapons never weep.

Ashley's gaze hardens, eyes fixed where the tear vanished.

JASMINE (CONT'D)
You think something inside you is
broken. It's not.

Ashley's expression doesn't shift, but something flickers in her eyes, recognition.

JASMINE (CONT'D)
Tell me, what was your first?

Ashley's eyes slowly track from where the tear fell, across the surface of the water, to the bloom of Cody's blood.

ASHLEY
A long time ago. A man who hurt
little girls. My stepmother's
brother, Uncle Roy. He saw the fear
in my eyes, then he saw my knife.

She pauses, remembering. A smile forms.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
A switch flipped. I felt a power
I'd never known.
(MORE)

ASHLEY (CONT'D)

Like I was somebody for the first time.

(beat, quieter)

Took years to realize it wasn't just him, it was what he was. What they all are.

Her smile sharpens. Cold. Final.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)

Nobody ever figured out where Uncle Roy went. He just moved away, they said.

Silence. Jasmine studies her.

JASMINE

How many since then?

Ashley's fingers trace patterns in the water. No reply.

JASMINE (CONT'D)

And that Vegas kid, Sarah Corvino?

ASHLEY

How...

JASMINE

...could I know? She texted her uncle. Said she got a ride in a colorful VW bus. We monitor interesting people. Alex Corvino is very interesting.

(beat)

Why did she have to go?

ASHLEY

She was a hitchhiker who robbed and murdered the people who picked her up. I could see it in her eyes the moment she got in my bus.

Ashley's voice is matter-of-fact.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)

I wanted to see what would happen when two hunters meet.

JASMINE

And what happened?

Ashley's smile is cold.

ASHLEY
I was better.

FLASHBACK - INT. ASHLEY'S BUS - NIGHT

Thick weed smoke. Ashley and a STRUNG-OUT SARAH CORVINO (18), tangled on a mattress in the back, both in bras and underwear.

Sarah, high and giggling, runs her fingers over Ashley's tattoo.

SARAH
That's so pretty. You're so pretty.

Ashley watches her. Clinical. Cold.

ASHLEY
You're not really going to Burning
Man are you?

SARAH
What?

ASHLEY
The way you looked at my handbag.
The way you keep glancing at the
door.

Sarah's hand moves - there's a cheap switchblade.

SARAH
Give me the fucking money.

She drags the blade down, tracing Ashley's whippoorwill tattoo.

SARAH (CONT'D)
I'll take this too.

Ashley doesn't move. Doesn't flinch. Almost... pleased.

Her hand shoots out-grabs Sarah's wrist, twisting the knife away.

SARAH (CONT'D)
Do you know who my uncle is? He'll
bury you in this fucking desert!

The struggle is quick, brutal, one-sided. Ashley is better. She knew she would be.

CLOSE ON: Ashley's face as Sarah goes still beneath her. No rage. No fear. Just satisfaction. Like completing an experiment.

Her hand reaches for something glinting on Sarah's neck. She unclasps a silver necklace.

BACK TO SCENE

Ashley's eyes are distant, seeing the memory. Without a word, her hand goes to her own pocket. She pulls out the necklace, letting it dangle from her fingers.

The "SC" pendant swings gently in the steam-filled air.

JASMINE
The eyes do tell you.

Jasmine's gaze intensifies.

JASMINE (CONT'D)
Most killers are broken. Impulsive.
Sloppy. They kill because they
can't help it.

Jasmine steps closer, her voice sharpening.

JASMINE (CONT'D)
We don't seek monsters. We seek
those who wield them. You don't
crave violence, you calibrate it.
That makes you the perfect weapon.

Ashley smiles.

JASMINE (CONT'D)
What did I say about the desert
burning away scars?

ASHLEY
...and what remains can be truly
magnificent.

Jasmine's voice softens, almost maternal.

JASMINE
Join us. You can keep hunting
strangers for sport... or start
hunting the ones who deserve it.

ASHLEY
And if I say no? What then?

JASMINE
We simply fade into the shadows.
But know this: we'll be watching.

Ashley glances out of the shed towards her bus.

ASHLEY
Myrtle?

Jasmine chortles, bemused.

JASMINE
Is she a doll you cling to?

Ashley's fingers tighten on the pistol, instantly suppressed.

ASHLEY
She's a debt I saved.

JASMINE
A shadow with baggage. I can work
with that.

Jasmine smiles, a predator welcoming a new cub to the pack.
Her voice soft, but it carries the weight of a verdict.

JASMINE (CONT'D)
You can never escape what you truly
are.

Ashley drops the necklace into the bloody water. It sinks.

Jasmine watches it disappear. A flicker of approval.

Ashley's eyes sharpen into a cold resolve. The last trace of
tremor, of doubt, vanishes from her hands. She looks at
Jasmine. A breath. A nod. Slow. Deliberate. Final.

The deal is struck, no contract, just a look.

Jasmine reaches into her pocket, pulls out a ring, and slides
it on her left middle finger.

CLOSE ON: Jasmine's hand. The ring is identical to the one
Shadow wears in the opening scene.

JASMINE (CONT'D)
We'll see if you earn one, love.

ASHLEY
How did you earn yours?

JASMINE
Same way you just did.

EXT. HOT SPRINGS SHED - DAY

PULL BACK AND UP:

Slow, high, and ominous over the shed as it continues to emit steam. The only movement in an endless desert.

A faint, haunting call of a WHIPPOORWILL echoes, then fades.

"GOODNIGHT MOON" by SHIVAREE plays as CREDITS ROLL.

FADE OUT.